

Are Vegetarians Healthier?

A Page for Patients From THE WESTERN JOURNAL OF MEDICINE and Your Physician

Myth: *Being a vegetarian is fine for people who live on communes, but what good would it do me?*

Reality: There are actually lots of ways vegetarianism could improve your life: you're likely to live longer, be healthier, and be kinder to your pocketbook and to the planet.

Myth: *If I were a vegetarian, would I have the strength to live a long, healthy life?*

Reality: Some studies have found that vegetarians may be as little as half as likely to die in a given year as are nonvegetarians. This is mainly due to their lower rates of heart disease and cancer, especially cancer of the large intestine. While some of this difference may be due to other parts of vegetarians' lifestyles—for example, having lower rates of smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol—much of it seems to be the result of their diet.

Myth: *How can I get enough protein if I don't eat meat?*

Reality: The American Dietetic Association finds that "vegetarian diets usually meet or exceed requirements for protein." Some vegetarians (called lacto-ovo vegetarians) get some of their protein from eggs and dairy products. Some vegetarians do not eat dairy products or eggs; this group, called "vegans," probably has the best health of all, with the lowest blood pressures and cholesterol levels. Clearly, high-protein plant foods (like grains and beans) can provide all the protein you need.

Myth: *What about vitamins and minerals?*

Reality: Vegetarians who eat enough calories and who eat a wide variety of nonanimal foods may actually end up better off in the vitamin and mineral department than are nonvegetarians. A major vitamin advantage vegetarians have is their higher intake of vitamins called antioxidants. These vitamins (such as A, C, and E)

occur naturally in many fruits and vegetables and have been shown to protect against heart disease and cancer. While vegans may need extra vitamins D and B₁₂, medical problems from vitamin deficiencies are rare, even in this group. Your physician or a nutritionist can give you more information about this issue.

Myth: *Isn't it expensive, complicated, and boring to be a vegetarian?*

Reality: Expensive? Anyone who's been to the grocery store lately can tell you that a pound of beans is a lot cheaper than a pound of beef. Complicated? Check out a couple of cookbooks, and you will see how easy it is to prepare tasty, interesting food. We recommend *Diet for a Small Planet* and *Recipes for a Small Planet* (both by Frances Moore Lappé, Ballantine Books), *The New Laurel's Kitchen* (Ten Speed Press), and *Sundays at Moosewood Restaurant* (Simon & Schuster). Boring? How many different types of animals do you usually eat? Maybe ten? Compare that with the dozens of different kinds of fruits and vegetables in any produce department, and you'll get a sense of the variety available to vegetarians.

Myth: *What difference does it make to anyone else what I eat? A pound of food is a pound of food, whether it's soybeans or beef.*

Reality: The production of 1 lb (0.45 kg) of American beef requires 16 lb (7.25 kg) of grain and soy. Eating the grain and soy yourself saves oil (used in transportation and farm chemicals), land, topsoil, and money. The evidence is strong that reducing meat production would be a major advantage for the global environment. (For more information on this, read Jeremy Rifkin's *Beyond Beef*, Dutton Books.) One other person who cares about your diet is your physician—that's why this page is in the waiting room. Why don't you ask your physician about whether eating less meat would be healthier for you?